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Edited by Sebastian Veg, Paris, Rue d'Ulm, "versions françaises," 2010, 304 pp.

**Victor Vuilleumier**

Translator: N. Jayaram

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- 1 Sebastian Veg pursues his translation of the fictional works of the great modern Chinese author Lu Xun (1881-1936), whom succeeding generations have put forward as the incarnation of the iconoclastic spirit of May Fourth or as a harbinger of the communist revolution. He now offers us a new French translation<sup>1</sup> of the first collection of Lu Xun's short stories entitled *Cris* (*Nahan* in Mandarin, or *Call to Arms*, 1923),<sup>2</sup> one of the most important examples of the new Chinese literature that it went on to influence greatly.

- 2 The collection consists of stories initially published in various magazines between 1918 and 1922, encompassing the May Fourth and New Culture movements (from about 1915 to 1925). The two stories "Le Journal d'un fou" (*Kuangren riji*, *Diary of a Madman*, 1918) and "L'édifiante histoire d'a-Q" (*AQ zhengzhuan*, *The True Story of Ah Q*, 1921-22),<sup>3</sup> popular right from the start, have often seemed, quite simply, as programmatic of "modern" ideas. In a way, the publication of *Nahan* came about towards the end of the May Fourth era, revealing a Lu Xun going over his stories and reflecting on his role as writer as well as on New Culture and the young republic. Veg's approach, as he defines it, concerns this very reflective dimension of the writer faced with May Fourth iconoclasm.



Lu Xun

**Cris**

呐喊



- 3 This edition consists of three parts: To start with, the translation of the actual collection, namely Lu Xun's "Preface" on the occasion of its publication and the stories themselves (164 pp.). Then follows the critical part: Copious notes (19 pp.) help the reader follow the essentials of allusions and references; they include, for instance, highly useful synthesising presentations by Chinese intellectuals or major figures of the modern era. The index helps locate these numerous references. These notes are rich enough to satisfy the reader, but Veg has also supplied a note for each of the texts (57 pp.), giving a rich and stimulating overview and a re-contextualisation helping to place the text in the history of ideas as well as in its contemporary socio-economic situation. Footnotes and notes in the text also take account of recent advances in Lu Xun criticism, to which frequent reference is made.
- 4 The book closes with an as yet unpublished article, "Sortir du règne de la critique" (Emerging from criticism's clutches – 37 pp.), in which Veg provides an overview that "takes a close look [...] at the critical reflection Lu Xun developed in *Nahan* on categories of modernity and democracy and on the position literature could adopt in such a context" (p. 260). Veg examines the texts to glean what Lu Xun had to say regarding the legacy of the 1911 revolution, as well as the May Fourth movement's demands and political debates. This is genuinely original and sheds new light on Lu Xun's stories.
- 5 In his "Note on the publication," Veg starts off with "the hypothesis" of a turning point in the way Lu Xun should be treated now (p. 10), and thus in reports about him in polemical reference to what he sees as a nationalist resurgence in *official* China today. He explicitly offers an interpretation of Lu Xun to respond to this "deviation." He does this by juxtaposing "'centre' and nation" as well as "'native land' and the idea of locality," which assumes prominence in his interpretation of Lu Xun (pp. 10-11).
- 6 This thesis is stated very strongly in the commentary on the short story *Guxiang* (My Old Hometown, 1921), for instance: in it the narrator talks of his brief return to the rural world of his childhood, on the occasion of the sale of the family home. The difference between the countryside as he finds it and that of his rosy memories, as well as that between himself and his former playmate, give rise to feelings of "frisson" (p. 84) and "melancholy" (p. 86), feelings characteristic of May Fourth literature. The story ends on the following noted formula, expressing Lu Xun's ambiguous and paradoxical attitude towards his world: "In reality, one can't tell whether hope exists or not. Very much like a path cutting through a field; there is, in fact, no path, but where many people tread, a path forms" (p. 88). Veg thus concludes with these words:
 

The image of the path denotes also the possibility of another modernity, less neglectful of the rural past in which it appears and of agrarian utopias of childhood, nostalgia for which still haunts the writer. In this sense the story signifies [...] Lu Xun's break with the iconoclastic conception of modernity associated with May Fourth. (p. 233)
- 7 Such an interpretative choice, provocative in a way, tends towards an innovative angle on the issue of "rural" and "modern,"<sup>4</sup> the theme of Lu Xun's complex link to the past, to his memories, and to Chinese tradition ("darkness" and "phantasm"), with which he is inalterably linked.
- 8 It is worth noting at this point what Veg has to say regarding Lu Xun's "realism." He chooses to see in the work a narrator seeming "to be an empirical personage" (p. 286), as much consumed as the characters in events he does not comprehend, like Ah Q in his

“true story,” and as incapable as they are of building a systematic external vision.<sup>5</sup> Lu Xun’s stories offer, in fact, a “continuum between personal memory and fiction” (p. 269), preventing the narrator from extricating himself from the complex reality, that of his own and Chinese society’s past. The narrator thus voices perplexity over his usefulness and literature’s possible action. In a sense, Lu Xun has absorbed the introspective dimension of May Fourth *literature*, to return in a critical way towards May Fourth *ideas*. Lu Xun’s relationship to politics imbues a larger personal perspective, which Veg has clearly traced.

- 9 This edition of *Nahan*, through the underlying interpretation, renews the “political” view taken of Lu Xun with the best of intentions. By offering a reflection of Lu Xun in his stories on another desired “modernity,” Veg calls for re-envisioning the history of May Fourth ideas according to Lu Xun’s lucid and at the same time human perspective. Further, he offers a reflection on the relationships among literature, politics, and modernity.
- 10 This presentation is amply served by a translation that faithfully and imaginatively renders Lu Xun’s stylistic variety, switching between a familiar tone (see p. 105, “il semblait se rendre compte que c’était râpé” – “he seemed to figure out that it was tattered”), concision (see p. 22, “J’ai compris que leur parole était du poison, leurs rires des couteaux” – “I grasped that their talk was poison, their laughter cutting”) and even lyrical evocation (see “L’opéra de village” [Village opera], pp. 171-2, 174-5, passages too long to cite here), each time finding the right tone.
- 11 Through the perspective of the commentary and the lively translation, this new French edition of *Nahan* will no doubt mark a “turning point” in the way Lu Xun is seen, something Veg calls for ardently. It will also help ensure that the author is better known, as he deserves to be, outside purely Sinological circles.

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## NOTES

1. It may be recalled that the first French version of the entire collection was published some years ago. It filled a vacuum and has served as the translation of reference (*Cris*, translated by Joël Bellassen, Feng Hanjin, Jean Join and Michelle Loi, Paris, Albin Michel, 1995). A list of all the French translations of these stories would be too long to list here, but it is worth mentioning just the first, “L’édifiante histoire d’a-Q,” published in 1926 in *Europe* magazine, translated by Jing Yinyu (1901-1930). On this, see Raoul David Findeisen, “Le malheureux garçon: Jean-Baptiste Jing Yinyu, pensionnaire de l’Institut franco-chinois de Lyon, traducteur de Romain Rolland” (The wretched boy: Jean-Baptiste Jing Yinyu, member of the Franco-Chinese institute, translator of Romain Rolland), *Gryphe*, no. 2, 2001, pp. 26-29.
2. Lu Xun, *Nahan*, Pékin, Xinchaoche, 1923. The original collection included a 15<sup>th</sup> story, “Le mont Buzhou” (*Buzhoushan*, Buzhou Mountain), which the author later withdrew.
3. The “ironic device” (p. 235) of the title of the story has led to different translations, such as, for example “Histoire d’A Q, véridique biographie” (The story of Ah Q: True life story) (Michelle

Loi) or “La véridique histoire d’A-Q” (The True Story of Ah Q) (Martine Vallette-Hémery), indicating the anti-historic intention of an anti-heroic account, whose principles the author sets out at the start of the story. The original translation given here points to the reversal of “Confucian orthodoxy” operating in the story.

4. This tension Veg perceives in Lu Xun between nation in the modern sense and pastuality, reflects that gripping Chinese intellectuals during the Republic, between a national or cultural definition of modern Chinese identity. Moreover, this exaltation of “the land” has been a theme dear to Chinese literature since the 1930s, especially the war years, and revived in more contemporary literature since the 1980s in the rush for “the search for roots”: these examples, seeking to explain the ascendancy, among other things, of Lu Xun’s story, nevertheless display ambiguous links with a form of nationalism (see Yinde Zhang “Le réalisme cruel: à propos du *Supplice du santal* de Mo Yan” (Cruel realism: On Mo Yan’s *Big Breasts and Wide Hips*), in Antonio Dominguez Leiva and Muriel Détrie (eds.), *Le Supplice oriental dans la littérature et les arts* (*Big Breasts and Wide Hips in literature and the arts*), Dijon, les Éditions du murmure, 2005, pp. 287-304).

5. Note the lack of distinction between the voices of the narrator in Ah Q, in his mute call for help (p. 135), and the paradoxical endings of many stories of Lu Xun. In Marston Anderson’s view, this helps create a distance from the violence of the representation (see *The Limits of Realism: Chinese Fiction in the Revolutionary Period*, Berkeley, University of California Press, 1990). Here Veg offers a deeper analysis of this literary trait.

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